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JAIME BENITEZ

Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico.

Address delivered at the 61st Annual Convention of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools and Affiliated Associations, held at Atlantic City, N. J., on November 29th, 1947.

EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY IN PUERTO RICO

The problems of education in Puerto Rico refer ultimately to the goal common to all teachers serving in the democratic tradition: To release and develop man's creative and social potentials that he may deal with reality knowingly, nobly, and effectively.

Attainment of this goal requires the dissemination of information, the inculcation of values and training in techniques. These are basic characteristics of the educational process everywhere, on the mainland and in Puerto Rico. We Puerto Ricans, however, deal frequently with situations unparalleled on the continent which require emphases sharply different from those current on the mainland. There are also many situations in common. I shall refer primarily to the divergencies. I hope we may discuss our special problems then in the light of the basic goals.

Puerto Rico is the smallest of the Greater Antilles, eight flying hours from New York City; it has a semi-tropical climate; it is only 100 miles long and 35 miles wide. It was ceded to the United States by Spain in 1898. Its two million people are citizens of the United States under the terms of the Organic Act of 1917. The primary language and the basic cultural patterns are Spanish. Ninety-five per cent of its trade—roughly $200,000,000 a year both ways—is with the continent. The population density is 600 per square mile, fifteen times greater than that of the United States.

Population pressure in the States would begin to compare with that of Puerto Rico if all the people of the world—two billion men, women, and children—landed here overnight, and if by the same nocturnal magic, all available mineral resources were eliminated, heavy industry disappeared, agriculture became the main source of employment and your top executive officers were selected in some mysterious ways by somebody else.

I do not say that mainland ingenuity would be incapable of solving such a riddle. Your solution might be so adequate and audacious as to keep under control unemployment, illiteracy,

disease, and prices, and at the same time foster production, wages, efficiency, and democracy. Life might become better than ever before. In their own microcosm, Puerto Rican leaders are trying to do that. All I wish to say is that ours is a task both worthwhile and exhausting. At every vantage point the double barrel aim is to broaden the range of service and raise its quality.

"The working classes in Puerto Rico—about 300,000 out of 350,000 families—averaged, according to a Works Progress Administration study of 1942, about $341 per family per year in cash income, or about $68 per person when all the children were counted. The 10,000 families at the other end of Puerto Rico's society averaged about $9,000 each, only 6 per cent less than the total of the bottom 300,000." * Until rather recently facts of this kind were either ignored or soft-pedaled. That, as you know, happens quite often in agricultural, pre-industrial, semi-feudal communities. The articulate classes were emotionally unaware of the needs, problems, and possibilities of 80 per cent of the population, and peace reigned in their vineyards.

In such an atmosphere, the problems which are regarded as vital in Puerto Rico today, could not emerge. Human problems do not really exist as such until one is aware of a dramatic conflict between what is and what ought to be, resolvable in favor of the latter, perhaps, through one's intervention. Old facts graduate into real problems only after our appraisal is sharpened by new values, and, per contra, there is no real problem so long as the finality of a situation is accepted.

Don Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish thinker, liked to show how Christendom merely plays at Christianity. If Western man ever becomes serious about Christianity, he said frequently, many of our first-class problems will lose significance, and many facts now indifferently regarded will be denominated as problems of the first magnitude immediately. In Puerto Rico we have not gone that far. But we have done the next best thing. Against tremendous odds we have taken democracy seriously and are trying to make it work.

During the last ten years a determined effort has been made to recognize, with an almost dogmatic vigor, the human rights and prerogatives of the four-fifths of our society which had

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* Paul Blanshard, *Democracy and Empire in the Caribbean*, p. 215, 1947.

hitherto been disregarded, and to call upon the Puerto Rican community to deal with their problems through the democratic processes of organized service. How? The present Island government was elected under a program calling for vast social, economic and cultural reorientations. It has four main objectives:

1. To better the lot of the poorer classes.
2. To increase the productivity of the individual and the community.
3. To render more efficient the machinery of Government.
4. To educate in the practices, privileges, and responsibilities of democratic life.

I shall mention briefly some of the things done to achieve these aims:

1. The lot of the poorer classes has been bettered through:
   (a) Greater investment in health and education. In 1941-42 the health budget was $2,500,000; in 1946-47 it was $12,500,000; the education budget was $7,000,000 in 1941; $23,000,000 in 1946-47.
   (b) Effective laws and agencies to provide for minimum wages, maximum hours and standards of safety.
   (c) Insular waterworks and electric light service to provide pure water and cheap light throughout municipalities and rural areas.
2. Insular production, traditionally centered around sugar, tobacco and coffee, has been strengthened through:
   (a) An industrial development company to go into the industrial activities in which private capital has been hesitant to take risks.
   (b) An agricultural development company to do what the timidity of private enterprise has failed to do for agriculture, fishing, cattle-raising and marketing.
   (c) A development bank to lend money for prospectively worthwhile industrial and agricultural activities.
   (d) A land authority to reduce the principal evils of unrestricted land tenure.
   (e) Special facilities for new investors.

3. Governmental efficiency has been increased through:
   (a) A planning and zoning board to prepare preliminary recommendations respecting governmental programs both to the Governor and to the Legislature and to prescribe and supervise compliance with zoning standards.
   (b) A budget bureau charged with the responsibility of gauging efficiency of governmental expenditure and passing on departments' claims for additional funds.
   (c) Periodical efficiency surveys and check-ups of procedures by the Public Administration Service of Chicago University.
   (d) An all-inclusive Civil Service.
   (e) In-service training of Government employees.
4. Democratic education has been fostered through:
   (a) Full opportunity for participation in the processes of government by the public at large.
   (b) Readiness to investigate all charges concerning improper governmental action.
   (c) Elimination of legislative intervention within different educational agencies as, for example, the University of Puerto Rico.

Ours is a state university, endowed with administrative and financial autonomy since 1942, an autonomy which is the envy and the ideal of many an administrator in state universities. The governing board of the University is now a continuous body of six private citizens appointed for ten years by the Governor with the consent of the Senate, and presided over by the Commissioner of Education. This Council elects the Chancellor; it confirms his appointments of the Deans; it approves the University budget in lump sums, and it is the final authority on general policy questions. The ordinary functions of the University are in the hands of the Chancellor, the internal University boards, and the Faculties.

Governmental support of the University is provided through self-renewing operations of special University taxes. This year's contribution to the University adds up to four million dollars.

It should be clear that both the Government and the University have frequently fallen short of their aims, that there is ample room for improvement by both, and that no responsible official is satisfied either with himself or with his accomplishments. My point is that Puerto Ricans are dealing directly with their own problems, that they have a constructive program in operation, and that they are waging a difficult fight for democratic ideals.

Our curriculum includes colleges of General Studies, Humanities, Social Sciences, Public Administration, Social Work, Natural Sciences, Education, Pharmacy, Commerce, Law, Engineering, and Agriculture. Regular daytime registration adds up to 7,000.

The largest proportion of Puerto Rican leaders and professional men have been trained at the University. Our new School of Public Administration conducts a broad program of in-service training for Government employees. Our Extension Courses serve 3,000 Public School teachers, one-third of the full insular staff. Last summer 3,286 teachers came to the University for further training.

The University knows that if we are going to produce adequate leadership for democratic government in Puerto Rico, we must broaden the social basis upon which our student body rests. Therefore, we have developed a broad scholarship program whereby the brightest students from the poorest families are carried at University expense through high school, college and post-graduate work, as long as they maintain a satisfactory record.

In the last five years the University has spent $1,300,000 in scholarships, exclusive of free tuitions, medical services and operating expenses. We have now 170 scholarship students doing post-graduate work; sixty are engaged in training for teaching and research or for Government service; 110 are medical students who, after graduation, will go back to Puerto Rico and work for four years with our Department of Health in tackling the medical and sanitation problems which plague primarily our rural districts.

It has been said that the University's efforts will further complicate our population problem, since, if effective, they will diminish the death rate and extend the life span. That type of

complication suits us perfectly well. Population drawbacks rest —in our opinion—not with the number of the healthy and able, but with the number of the sick, the destitute and the untrained.

The University has faced the same argument, only in reverse, when experimenting with "weed-killers." If we kill weeds with chemicals, we are asked, how are the farm laborers to live? We have, nevertheless, gone ahead with the experiments. Social justice without science is a luxury Puerto Rico cannot afford.

The University administration is profoundly aware of the dangers of inbreeding and stagnation, ever present in an insular community. We have developed a policy of engaging many visiting professors from far and wide. For the last five years, no less than ten at a time and sometimes as many as twenty-five distinguished teachers from all parts of the Americas, and mainly from the United States, have come to the University of Puerto Rico to take part with us in fulfilling our duty—as the University Law states it—"to point out the truth and to instill the methods of knowing it, of testing it, or of doubting it—in an attitude of profound respect towards creative truth and creative doubt."

At the same time, the University has granted special financial aid to its own instructors for further post-graduate training on the Continent. The average appropriation for that purpose has been $70,000 a year. Three hundred instructors have profited therefrom.

The University of Puerto Rico subscribes to the theories of general education. Since 1943 we have had on our main campus at Rio Piedras a program of General Studies which has been highly successful and which has now been adopted, at the request of the Faculty of Engineering, as a pre-requisite for its professional courses.

During the last ten years there has been a marked trend among our students in favor of the stiffest scientific courses. Our highest collegiate registration today—1138 students—is in the Faculty of National Science; the second highest is in the School of Engineering; the third highest in the School of Education; the fourth, in the School of Agriculture; and the smallest of all—107—in the School of Law.

The University is committed to the principle of finding out the real facts about Puerto Rican life. Under our Social Science Research Center—established in 1944—qualified social scientists are gathering, analyzing, interpreting and bringing out data relative to social and economic problems.

Thus, with the cooperation of Kingsley Davis, from Princeton University, the Center is carrying out fundamental research concerning our population problems. Under the leadership of Lydia Roberts, from Chicago, an investigation relative to family needs and nutritional habits in Puerto Rico will be published next February.

Studies of Puerto Rico's National Income, its Balance of Payments, Emigration, and Basic Economic Problems of the Island, have been made and published and are available in English.

The University of Puerto Rico believes in and practices complete academic freedom. Its teachers are selected regardless of their political, religious, and economic beliefs. The only requirement is that they do their work well, which, as you know, is a consummation devoutly to be wished and which—unlike Hamlet's anticipation of death—is never certain of eventual fulfillment.

The opposition to the University's administration is free, untrammeled, and highly articulate. I think it is good that it has so developed. I am convinced that the best way of insuring responsibility and confidence, certainly in Puerto Rico, is by acting with the fullest understanding of, and with magnanimity towards, critics and criticisms.

All these considerations point to a University functioning in a way that universities throughout the world properly dream of functioning, as a social yeast and ferment, as a goad to the imagination of public policy makers, and as a repository of those ideals and techniques by which men outside of universities may lift themselves from the tyranny of outworn habits of spirit and mind and the deadening effect of outmoded organization and technology.

Because it is all these things and is dedicated to being a great leaven in the community which surrounds it, the University is about to inaugurate its new School of Industrial Arts. It is a

huge undertaking, which will provide mechanical and industrial training in all basic fields of modern technology to 3,000 students. The aim is to provide the trained personnel necessary to permit the development of industry in Puerto Rico.

This dove-tails with the program of the Industrial Development Company, a public corporation created in 1942 to foster additional productive activities, and endowed with $20,000,000 for that purpose.

Under normal conditions the School of Industrial Arts should have been initiated and established by the Insular Department of Education.

It is an activity below University level and its success will call for substantial modifications of the vocational training program of the Insular Government. But conditions are not normal in the Insular Department of Education, as we shall see now.

Public schools have been one of the main forces for democracy in Puerto Rico. From the very beginning, the sons and daughters of the wealthy and of the destitute, of the powerful and the defenseless, have studied, learned and played under the same roof. Puerto Ricans have an almost pathetic faith in education. Every day, rain or shine, throughout the hills and valleys of Puerto Rico, thousands of bare-footed, hungry children walk several miles to reach over-crowded rural schools. In thousands of poor homes one sees outstanding in the parlor as its main decoration a framed eighth grade diploma bearing witness to the brave determination of the parents to provide for their children as best they know. Often times I have wondered how fully we teachers have kept faith with such devotion.

The Insular Government assigns 40% of its present budget to public education.

In 1900 the Federal Government took its first census of Puerto Rico. It was a very careful and exhaustive inventory. The Census Director was shocked at one point in particular: there were only 34,000 students in all schools, public and private. There were 288,000 children of school age without any schools to go to. The annual governmental expenditure for education was then $203,373. American officials held that every effort should be made to rectify this situation. The people of Puerto

Rico agreed and put up the money gladly. Our population then was 953,000 people.

The Acting Commissioner of Education reports that there are more children without schools in 1947 than there were half a century ago. At present, 300,000 children cannot go to school because there are not enough schools to go to. Nevertheless, there are now 460,000 children in schools; the illiteracy rate has been reduced from 79 per cent to 29 per cent, and Puerto Rico spends, for the current year, $30,000,000 a year on education.

A capital expenditure of $100,000,000 would be required to provide adequate service for our student population, and an operation annual budget of $60,000,000 would be needed to keep that service going. Such enormous expenditures are obviously beyond Puerto Rico's possibilities. Even if the entire Insular budget were devoted to education, a practical impossibility, it would not be enough to assure an eighth grade education for all of our children.

In my opinion, the key educational problem in Puerto Rico is not that we need more schools,—which we do; or more teachers—which we do; or that our students should be willing and able to stay longer with us—which they should. I believe that it is far more important to give to the whole educational system a sense and purpose in terms of the realities and potentialities of our life.

This is a very difficult task. It requires a thorough grasp of the multiple forces operating upon Puerto Rican life. It requires the intellectual strength necessary to fashion all these forces into a creative, meaningful and inspiring pattern. It requires the technical ability to implement such a philosophy in terms of courses, programs and school activities. But it has to be done.

Insular communities in the Caribbean are scattered settlements lacking in many ways the cultural stimulii provided elsewhere by museums, theatres, art galleries, great libraries and other supplementary sources of public education. Such a situation makes even heavier the educational responsibility of the school.

Ours is an emerging community, struggling to find itself and to develop along lines of democratic standards. Our school has

to be a leading and effective center of knowledge, inspiration, and hope, not only of the young but also of men now endowed with responsibility by virtue of the power of offices they hold and of the property and technology they direct.

The complete re-examination of our present educational set-up—long past due—is decisively hindered, however, by a political limitation over which we have no control. There has not been a full-fledged Commissioner of Education in Puerto Rico since the forced resignation of Dr. Gallardo three years ago. Moreover, it seems likely that no Commissioner of Education will be appointed before January, 1949, when, under the amended Organic Act, the Governor of Puerto Rico will have authority to make the appointment.

This leads us to another difficulty, further complicating our educational task: the question of political status. It is very difficult to envisage dispassionately the processes of democracy or the noble traditions of American life, while the key officers of the Puerto Rican Government—the Governor, the Commissioner of Education, the Auditor, the Attorney General, and the Judges of the Supreme Court—are appointed by the President of the United States and while Congress can change any of our laws it wants. The situation has been ameliorated by recent legislation which provides that the Governor of Puerto Rico will be an elective officer entitled to select his complete cabinet. The posts of Judges and the Auditor will continue, however, to be filled by the President of the United States.

These changes are obviously insufficient, much less than what is due both to Puerto Rico and to the United States.

In spite of the many difficulties facing them, the people of Puerto Rico refuse to follow the counsels of despair. On the contrary, they keep up a courageous and exemplary fight for self-betterment.

Lately, the continental public has heard much about Puerto Ricans, mostly ill. It seems, in the view of people who should know better, that the safety of the Republic is at stake because yearly a few thousand Puerto Ricans find their way to the mainland. It is a sad reflection on the uses of abundance that while New York goes into hysteria concerning the influx of their

fellow citizens from the Caribbean, two million people, standing upon a small island, struggle gallantly to attain the democratic way of living in spite of overwhelming odds against them.

Compared with the rest of the Caribbean areas, statistics concerning life in Puerto Rico are gratifying. Thus Puerto Rico excels all other communities in the Caribbean in schools, books, roads, automobiles, telephones, radios, medical facilities, as well as in national income and industrial development per capita. Compared with the United States and with other industrial communities, Puerto Rico's indexes lag way behind with little chance of substantial improvement.

The Island is aiming at that improvement but it knows that adequate development without most vigorous efforts on its part and most cordial cooperation and understanding on the part of the mainland cannot be expected. Our sustaining hope is that both will do their part.